

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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REP. TRENT VAN HAAFTEN'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – In the last days of a legislative session, all attention turns to House-Senate conference committees, the groups that help lawmakers reach final agreements on the major issues.

This year will be no different. In the last two weeks of the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly, conference committees will be charged with reaching a consensus on issues ranging from state budget, daylight-saving time, methamphetamine and education reforms.

Conference committees are made up of four legislators, two from the House and two from the Senate. Generally, there are two Republicans and two Democrats on a conference committee, but it is common to see the groups filled out only by the majority party in each chamber.

As of now, I have been appointed as a conferee to three Senate Bills: SB 18 (Inspector General), SB 444 (Meth Bill) and SB 8 (Family Law Arbitration).

The charge of each conference committee is to resolve any differences between the House and Senate version of a particular bill. On many occasions, those differences are minor and an agreement is reached quickly. A committee report detailing that agreement is signed, then voted upon by both the House and Senate. If both chambers approve the report, the measure goes on to the governor for final action.

That's what happens when everything goes to plan. When it doesn't, the legislative process gets interesting, infuriating and very hard to follow.

The general rule of thumb is that a conference committee report can only deal with specific subject matter. Any other idea placed into the report must have the same subject matter or run the risk of not being considered germane.

In addition, a conference committee report must be signed by all four conferees. There have been times when a conferee disagrees with the report and refuses to sign it. One of two things then happens. The bill dies or, if the conferee is a member of the minority party, the majority party has been known to simply replace that particular conferee with someone who will sign the committee report.

I have great concern that efforts will be made to "water down" initiatives contained within the Meth Bill. If the conference committee report for SB 444 does not include initiatives previously supported by myself and the House (which have recently been endorsed by Gov. Daniels), then I will have difficulty signing the conference committee report.

You will see conference committees on all of 2005's major issues, including House Bill 1001, the biennial state budget, and House Bill 1120, which contains the Senate Republican tax increases to help fund the budget.

House Republicans promise that all representatives will get at least 24 hours to study the final budget before voting on it. I hope they will be able to hold to that promise, because they need to do a lot of work to improve a plan that reduces education funding and increases property taxes. The proposed education cuts have already hit close to home as local school systems have provided notice of layoffs to teachers. I will join other House Democrats in working to change the efforts to cut education funding.

The action will be on a fast track and I will try to keep you posted on everything that takes place. In the space I have

left, let me tell you about some of the actions that have taken place in the House the past few days.

Senate Bill 127, which would bring daylight-saving time to Indiana, will be going to a conference committee. After several tries, the House passed the legislation by the narrowest of margins, a vote that indicates the strong divisions this issue causes among the public. The Senate has yet to weigh in on the time issue. Although the governor has waffled on whether he wants most of Indiana to observe daylight-saving time in the Eastern or Central Time Zones, it is apparent that he does want the time change in place.

Representatives also defeated a proposal that would have allowed a pilot program for automated traffic law systems. These systems would have featured a camera device that produced still photographs of any vehicle that proceeds through a red light at targeted intersections.

House members were able to amend Senate Bill 508 to increase benefits for workers injured on the job. The proposal, which will end up in a conference committee, will raise benefits in two areas: the average weekly wage paid to an injured worker while he or she is away from the job, and the one-time benefit paid to cover the loss of a limb in a work-related accident.

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